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A preferred vision for administering schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The role of an educational leader has changed in the last century. The principal of a school has more responsibility and accountability than ever before. Chief among them is being a role model for students and adults in the school and community, and a leader in the school's progress. Always in the public eye, the principal must make choices based on good judgement and data, and must search for what is best for the stakeholders. The principal should be open to new ideas and pushing the school forward. As Wilmore said in *Principal Leadership*, a school that is not moving forward is standing still and stagnant, and some schools have done that for too long, which is an injustice to kids and the community (Wilmore, 2002).

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A REFELECTIVE ESSAY

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by

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Dr. Robert Decker

So much of a teacher's day revolves around what is happening at the time, that it is necessary for teachers to take time to reflect. We must prepare for what questions students might have, what behaviors might occur, what problems might arise, and what success we might be able to celebrate. A reflection that might not happen every day, however, is the more general question of what education is to me. With the demands of daily activities, we in the education field have to slow down and check with ourselves about our own personal visions, and our vision for kids. It is a good idea for each of us to ask ourselves what education means, and why we became involved with education in the first place.

When people ask me what I teach, I often tell them that I teach kids, and my social studies class is my tool. I get a variety of reactions, but most of the time, people smile and appreciate the positive outlook. I explain to my students each year that social studies class involves many subjects, like history, geography, economics, government, and the list goes on. "But what we all want," I tell them, "is to help you become productive citizens in your community and your world." Whether I taught social studies or any other curriculum, I knew that was my goal for educating.

Even when I was in sixth grade, I remember some friends saying that they hated history because it was so long ago and our teacher was boring. I could not understand their pain because I enjoyed it. I know that was when I decided that I loved history, and I knew being a teacher excited me.

During college I spent summers working at Fr. Flanagan's Boys Home in Boys Town, Nebraska. While there, I realized the power of positive influence and the importance of role models in children's lives. I recognized that kids appreciate positive people around them sharing positive ideas. I knew that one of my talents was working with kids and helping them see their own worth and success.

Helping children learn about their abilities is a major focus of education. Because of the nature of the job, we often do not know the impact we have on others. We as educators must use our short time with students to find out what they can do well and draw those talents out of them. Using Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences can provide us with beneficial strategies for helping kids develop talents and high self-esteem. By educating kids in the various areas, we increase their awareness and likelihood of becoming responsible, productive citizens. It is especially important for us to offer support to children whose family and home lives might not give them hope and positive encouragement.

Each staff member within the school has a responsibility to make the school a safe learning environment for children. Many of our students currently live in homes where they are not appreciated and respected. Schools should be havens for anyone who does not feel safe or valued at home. They should also be

places for students to have shelter from harassment or abuse from peers and teachers. Educators have a duty to protect our kids and give them a place to learn.

I have been able to instruct children in positive ways as a classroom teacher, and I would like to be able to continue my influence as a leader in education. As a principal, I would be able to apply solid pedagogy and strong instructional methods to an entire staff and school full of students. I have paid close attention to my evaluators and have observed many excellent teachers in the last several years, and I have developed ideas about what I think are good theories, practices, and lessons to use in the classroom. I would like the opportunity to use my knowledge to pass on good teaching skills to a staff of teachers, paraprofessionals, and others. Of course I do not have all the answers, but I feel that I could lead a faculty in discovering and practicing good techniques together.

It is vital that all stakeholders in a school support the vision and follow through with activities to carry the vision into the classroom, playing fields, and community. I have had many opportunities to enhance my interpersonal and leadership skills, and I think I would be a strong liaison between the community and school when developing the vision. Being a steward for that vision within the school would be an important task, and I would like the challenge to do so.

When I see former students and their parents, they often provide me with some feedback that what they learned in my class was memorable and important

to them. It makes me realize that I did have an impact, even if it is only a small one. As an administrator, I would be able to reach out to hundreds of students and their parents, and spread influence to even more families. A cumbersome part of an administrator's job is to hire and evaluate staff. We all know that with an upcoming teacher and administration shortage, the number of students with special needs in general education classrooms, and with the requirements of No Child Left Behind, the magnitude of a teacher's responsibilities is unprecedented. I think my interpersonal and perceptive skills would help me be able to put together a solid staff of educators who can help kids be successful.

The role of an educational leader has changed in the last century. The principal of a school has more responsibility and accountability than ever before. Chief among them is being a role model for students and adults in the school and community, and a leader in the school's progress. Always in the public eye, the principal must make choices based on good judgement and data, and must search for what is best for the stakeholders. The principal should be open to new ideas and pushing the school forward. As Wilmore said in Principal Leadership, a school that is not moving forward is standing still and stagnant, and some schools have done that for too long, which is an injustice to kids and the community. The principal must be a visionary and a manager to make the school progressive (Wilmore, 2002).

The school leader also has a dual role for students. If the school is a safe learning environment, the students need to know that the principal is a safe person to trust, and they should feel comfortable with him. However, he must also be held accountable for students' actions in school, and therefore must hold high expectations. If students are to be trusting and live up to high expectations, the same can be true for the staff. The principal is the ultimate person who answers for any success or failures in the building.

The principal also is the guiding light for teachers to help them become better. As an instructional leader and lead learner, the principal should address what is best practice for the school's students at the time to help them learn, and help teachers achieve the vision and goals set by the broad school community.

Students and staff within the school depend on the principal for leadership and guidance, but other stakeholders, including all taxpayers, have a right to know that their public school is being operated by a competent leader. Since public funds are in the hands of school leaders, they have a responsibility to use the resources wisely. The budget has to be prepared to have the most efficient education for kids in the most cost-effective manner. The principal should design the school's organization based on the vision developed by the school community, and he should operate the school by communicating well within the school and with the community at large. Resources, including the budget, personnel, and technology are in the hands of the educational leader.

Mr. McCarty would be happy to know that one of his former sixth grade students is now working to earn a Master of Arts degree in school administration. As I have reflected on what education means and why I chose to be a part of it, I have thought of the dozens of teachers, colleagues, administrators, students, parents, and other supporters I have encountered. I ponder how each might have played a specific role in why I chose to enter the administration program. When the vision of an individual involved with education meets the vision of the school, it seems that a strong educational leader will arise. As I have read about the principalship and what it means to be a school leader, I have learned that it is one of the most important and crucial jobs a person can have. I have learned that it is more than a job, though; it is a calling. He who has the skills to lead a staff, a student body, and all of the families and other stakeholders to promote increased student achievement in a safe and caring environment, deserves great respect. After studying those skills, I believe I hear the call.

Vision

"'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' asked Alice. 'That depends a great deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cheshire Cat" (Carroll, 1963, p. 59). Alice learned in her timeless story that no one can help her go where she wants to go unless she knows herself. Likewise, people who travel know that they often arrive at their destination more quickly if they know what their destination is and know how to get there. School leaders are no

different; they know that educators can do a better job of teaching children if they all know where they want to go and how they will get there. Covey, Merrill, & Merrill (1994) highlighted this plan or vision when they wrote that

> vision is the fundamental force that drives everything else in our lives. It impassions us with a sense of the unique contribution that's ours to make. It empowers us to put first things first, compasses ahead of clocks, people ahead of schedules and things (p. 116).

Principals must lead the school staff to create that road map for schools and be clear about the common vision of the school community.

The ISSL Standard One describes an administrator as a promoter of "the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning" (Iowa Department of Education, 2000). Understanding of and commitment to a vision of high standards of learning will enable and inspire me, as a principal, to lead all stakeholders in our quest for success.

Buell (1992) talked about the need for leaders who share their values with the staff and work to develop a common vision of what the school will look like, based on those values. Rather than each staff member working toward his or her own goals, the entire staff builds a mission and creates goals using the same values and same vision. The values and beliefs of the school district must be the basis of the school's vision, and it takes a skillful leader to facilitate that for a

group (Short & Greer, 1997). Cunningham & Cordeiro (2003) note that "successful organizations move toward visions and practices that reinforce their core ideologies and values" (p. 160). The principal must also be prepared for disagreement, and for the possibility that he will have to work with individuals specifically because their beliefs might not coincide with those of the rest of the staff. This does not mean that the principal's ideas are the only correct ones, but the principal might encounter some staff members whose ideas contradict and impede the consensus of the rest of the group (Buell, 1992).

I believe that it would be difficult for a new principal to walk into a school and assume that the staff shares the same values and beliefs he holds. Therefore, a principal faces the task of talking with individual staff members about what they each believe, and talking with a larger groups of staff and other stakeholders to develop what the vision of the school will be. As Senge et al. (2000) suggest, if you can gather many people who have the best interests of the school and its children in mind, and repeatedly discuss with them, then people would learn and improve together rather than being separate entities. The principal is the guide in determining what the common values are and turning that into a shared vision.

From that shared vision, the principal can lead the staff to explore the gaps between what the school is doing and what the school should be doing (Zmuda, et al., 2004). Those decisions will help the staff direct themselves toward necessary steps to ensure student achievement (likely to be some part of the vision). Many

schools do not move past writing the vision statement to align the school with the vision and stimulate progress. It is important to "keep in mind that there is a big difference between being an organization with a vision statement and becoming a truly visionary organization (Collins & Porras, 1994, p. 239).

The difference between vision, mission, and goals still is not clear among many educators. Hoyle, et al. (2001) go on to explain that the principal's job is to clarify for everyone that "the vision statement is the 'why,' the mission statement is the 'what,' and the goal statements are the 'how'" (p. 2). Each educator in the school should be able to articulate the vision that the staff developed and agreed to. The principal should incorporate the vision into staff meetings, staff development sessions, and into conversations with staff when questions arise about why the school is going in a specific direction. Once the staff has developed its vision, the mission statements tell the community what the staff wants its students to be able to do with their education. Then the staff breaks the task down into goals, so they can measure whether students are reaching them or not. If a principal holds the conversations with people and turns their values and beliefs into a shared vision, then the mission statement and goal statements should make sense to the staff. The principal's next job is to communicate all of that to the community. When holding discussions with parents, business leaders, and other professionals and citizens in the community, the principal can promote the

school's strengths and vision to ensure students receive a quality education and elicit support from the community.

Implementation and stewardship of the school's vision are vital to a school's success, particularly in the current age of increased accountability. As a principal, I will help the leadership team or site council develop goals and strategies to achieve the mission and vision. Since data should drive our decisions, the goals will be measurable and written in terms of student achievement. Perhaps the most difficult part of working with the vision is the stewardship that follows. The principal cannot just help create the vision, communicate it to the community, develop goals and strategies, and then let staff and students flounder in the darkness. I would incorporate each group's report of their progress into a monthly meeting of the leadership team or site council. That team, not just the principal, would be responsible for making sure the strategies are in place to meet the goals. I would offer assistance to all, in the form of verbal and written feedback, data collection and analysis, and guidance through the process.

A fiction author, a family of five on summer vacation, and an esteemed author all recognized the necessity of a vision. They all appreciated the value of thinking ahead and developing an idea about where they wanted to ultimately go. The most successful organization leaders know that vision is one of the most distinguishing characteristics that sets those organizations apart from others

(Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003). As a principal, I believe it is my responsibility to work with the staff to answer the question "why." Why does our school exist? Why are we educators? Why are we going to work together to help children achieve? The answers we find will be our vision. Our vision will guide our mission and goal statements. Our vision, mission, and goals will be the catalysts we will use to increase student achievement.

Instruction

The role of an educational leader is complex, and the leader is rarely successful when leading alone from the top. I believe that in any school setting, where a principal has to serve as an instructional leader, collaboration is a necessary element. He is best advised to work collaboratively with teachers, parents, students, district administrators, and others in the community who play a role in the school and who will benefit from educated and successful citizens. The principal will then continue to develop instructional programs that focus on student learning and staff professional development.

The ISSL Standard Two, Instructional Leadership, requires that the principal has knowledge of student growth and development and applied learning theories, as well as instructional programs conducive to student learning and staff professional development. It also states that the principal should value the variety of ways in which students can learn. The principal also ensures that professional

development promotes a focus on student learning consistent with the school vision and goals (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Instructional leadership involves a principal assuring that the teachers are experts in content area, but also in teaching children. This is particularly true in middle schools. Many people consider adolescence to be the most difficult time for children as they grow, so middle school principals have a special job to make sure their teachers are experts in adolescence. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) completed a national study of leadership in middle level schools and determined that a majority of middle school teachers "have not had training specific to pedagogy with early adolescents" (Petzko, 2004, p. 84). The principal, therefore, must provide professional development to teach strategies for teachers to use with students of varying needs. In the report, NASSP cited a statement by the National Middle School Association that said that in order to improve the learning of adolescents, we must improve the professional development of those who teach them, which is the responsibility of the principal, among others (Petzko, 2004). One way I would incorporate this instruction into my school is by sharing research with the staff. At the beginning of each year, and especially as new staff are hired, I would find some time during professional development time, to discuss the best ways to teach adolescents. I do not want to be a director, but a facilitator of that discussion. Therefore, I would offer any

resources I have to staff members, and I would encourage them to engage in professional reading or even activities.

I firmly believe that instructional leadership should be a collaborative effort between the principal and the staff, rather than direct, top-down leadership from the principal. I can recall instances beginning with my childhood in which I was more invested in an activity or rules because I played a major role in creating them. Likewise, I believe teachers are more likely to be self-motivated and influential teachers if they are actively involved in the instructional process. The principal should be concerned more with the improvement of student achievement rather than having control, which will motivate him to work with teachers and all stakeholders collaboratively (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies, 2000). Sergiovanni (1992) continued this idea and added that direct leadership does not contribute to the whole school becoming better on its own. He said that "if command and instructional leadership are practiced as dominant strategies, they can breed dependency in teachers and cast them in roles as subordinates" (p. 123). What he did think was positive, was the idea of a principal encouraging leadership among the teachers themselves. "As leaders of leaders, they work hard to build up the capacities of teachers and others, so that direct leadership will no longer be needed" (p. 123). Richard DuFour (2002) encouraged principals to leave behind the notion of the principal as the instructional leader who "emphasized the inputs of the learning process." He believed that the "learning-centered principals"

should "shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results" (p. 15). In this model of the principal, staff, students, and other changing their focus to how everyone learns, the collaborative effort will result in greater learning.

In my school, the roles I play in instructional leadership have provided me with experience in working collaboratively. I have been the liaison between the Site Council and our social studies department chair, helping to lead the school in improving student achievement in social studies tests and maps and diagrams tests. To do this, I have had to work closely with our Site Council members, curriculum team members, department chair, and assistant principal. I found that my input was valued highly by those involved, and that I actively sought the contributions of others to create our new instruction in social studies classes. I also served on the Learning Strategies Leadership Team for our school. During small group workshops, we became more familiar with the philosophy, content, and processes of the initiative so we could lead our colleagues in the learning process. Every other week I met with the other seventh grade social studies teachers to work together to incorporate the strategies into our curriculum. These experiences have provided me to work collaboratively with others to develop instruction to increase student achievement. I have learned from both administrators in my school that teachers teaching each other is a more productive and motivational way to use curriculum for students. As a principal, I want to use

methods like these to make teacher instruction and student achievement projects that administrators, school and district staff, and parents and students work on together. The idea of working collaboratively to develop good instruction ties in with ISSL Standard Four, Collaborative Leadership, because I would use my knowledge of "emerging issues and trends that potentially impact the school community" (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

The needs of students in urban schools require the principal to know about students in the school. He should know the demographics, history, personalities, and psychological development of students. Being an expert in those areas, and sharing the expertise with the staff, will help the principal lead teachers to make positive student growth. Another very important factor in how well the people work to increase student achievement is collaborative effort. If the principal is a knowledgeable, strong, collaborative leader, instructional leadership should become a part of the whole school environment, making students, teachers, and all other stakeholders, responsible for learning.

Change

Michael Fullan (2001) made the case that "for better or worse, change arouses emotions, and when emotions intensify, leadership is key" (p. 1). The more involved I become in my school and district, the more I see that change does indeed arouse emotion, and the success or failure of that change depends a great deal on the leadership. I believe that the principal is the most visible leader in the

school and carries the ultimate responsibility, but I also know that as a principal, I will want to create a culture in which each member of the school feels the desire to participate in leadership roles. I have found that this is especially necessary in transitions or times of change, because positive support or negative dissent can greatly impact the success of the change. But change is often a complex process that requires great planning from administrators. The principal must have a clear plan to know why change is necessary, who will be involved, and how it will happen.

When a principal works with stakeholders during times of change, one of his beliefs for the vision should be that school improvement is continuous and changing. Visionary leadership combines with the ISSL Standard Six, Political Leadership, because the principal has to be aware of political, social, cultural, and economic systems that impact schools, and those systems change. For example, No Child Left Behind requires that principals understand the various ways the law impacts those systems and schools. Additionally, Standard Four, Collaborative Leadership, is important because building partnerships with families and community members will strengthen the principal's ability to lead his school through periods of change to improve student achievement (Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

The first question I will have to answer for myself, and with others, is why change is necessary. Fullan (2002) made the case that the principal as

instructional leader, while essential in the school, has not taken us as far as we need to go when searching for school improvement. He said "we must now raise our sights and focus on principals as leaders in a culture of change" (p. 20). However, I sometimes hear teachers complain that change in education is simply a pendulum; we adopt one new idea, and a few years later we swing back the other way. I believe legislators, educators, and change facilitators recognize that, and I think the focus now has moved toward sustainability of change. Schlechty (2001) argued that "the reason schools have not improved is that they have changed so much and so often with so little effect that leaders seem baffled about what to do next" (p. 2). With the levels of accountability in our education system, there is no opportunity for a principal to be just a manager or just an instructional leader. The principal must be a leader to first understand, and then control the system of change (Schlechty, 2001).

After a principal understands why change is necessary, the question of who will decide and implement the change must be answered. Hall and Hord (2001) described some benefits and flaws of top-down and bottom-up change, but maintained that all participants should decide upon change, and those participants should be viewed as equal in the education process. They included federal and state government, as well as district and school staff members. Often, those people do not share mutual trust, but a true change of the system for school improvement cannot happen until they do. Another important effort district and

school leaders should be conscious of is who they choose as the leaders of change. I believe that making changes in education is going to become much more challenging as No Child Left Behind requirements affect more districts and schools. After a tremendous improvement in student test scores at my school last year, one administrator attributed the success not to teachers working harder, but teachers working differently. New challenges bring the need for new ideas. Heifetz (1994) said that the answers would not come easily, but that everyone should be involved in the leadership. He claimed that "instead of looking for saviors, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways" (p. 21).

When the "why" and the "who" have been solved, the next part is "how" the change will take place. Everyone involved in the change must be supportive of the change in order for it to work. The principal can begin to do this by clearly communicating what the new system will look like and why it is necessary (Schlechty, 2001). The first belief that everyone in the school should recognize is Hall and Hord's (2001) first principle of change: change is a process, not an event. They concurred with other research that said three to five years is the necessary time for change to truly take place; it cannot happen in a two-day workshop. I think most educators understand that idea, yet it is difficult to not see improvement and results right away. Therefore, the principal must actively create

a culture in which change is not only accepted, but also welcomed and seen as necessary for improvement. In her review of current research for middle level educators, Irwin (1997) found that principals who successfully restructured middle level schools "created environments with high levels of involvement and collaboration in problem solving, governance, staff development, team operations, and decision making" (p. 343). She also said that those schools were "unique cultures that reflected the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the faculty" (p. 343). To take that a step further, Fullan (2001) argued that leading in a culture of change might mean that a principal has to change what people value and how to work together to accomplish it, and that doing so is what will lead to deep, lasting change.

Another piece of the puzzle to know how to make change successful is knowing the staff and knowing who can be leaders and who needs extra assistance. Facilitating change is a team effort, and a principal would be wise to utilize the strengths of teachers and other staff members who can help create the positive culture discussed earlier (Hall and Hord, 2001). In his analysis of what made some companies improve from "good to great," Collins (2001) noted that great executives shifted their best leaders to places of opportunity rather than problems. When strong leaders were provided the chance to change a potential problem into something positive, the companies soared. Likewise, when a principal encourages teacher leaders by providing them opportunities, they will

shine and lead the school toward success. Schechty believed that "schools can improve when their leaders turn them into organizations where change is embraced as an opportunity rather than coped with as a problem" (p. 3). I think this is particularly important when leading a school through the accountability and requirements of No Child Left Behind. It would be easy for a principal to complain about the law and make excuses with or for staff members. But the reality is that the principal should garner support among staff members and promote change for increased student achievement.

Hall and Hord (2001) offered methods of identifying how teachers feel about change. The principal and/or the leadership team should be aware of each teacher's Stage of Concern (p. 61) so they can work with individual teachers' concerns. As the change innovation is in progress, the principal and/or leadership team can examine teachers' Levels of Use (p. 82) to assess growth within the change. Using a map of what the change could and should look like, an Innovation Configuration Map (p. 39), the principal and/or team can identify strengths to continue encouragement or areas of concern to assist teachers. Schlechty (2001) also identified three strategic actions to promote sustained change. He recommended that the change leader help staff understand the need for the change and what it will look like, explain the anticipated results and how they will be assessed, and ensure them that the necessary training and support are in place.

As with any change in any occupation, a principal will certainly encounter some people who do not want to change or who question the purpose, quality, or potential of the change. Hall and Hord (2001) introduced a concept called mushroom, which is an intervention of change, usually negative, that is caused by would-be change implementers as opposed to change facilitators. Those people create mushrooms, or negative interventions, because of their interpretation of something during the change process. A principal can anticipate how teachers might interpret certain aspects of the change and can work to address them effectively before they develop into full opposition of the change. Fullan (2001) admitted that emotions often are high in a culture of change. He suggested that successful leaders welcomed people's doubts and even resistance, recognizing dissent as a "potential source of new ideas and breakthroughs" (p. 74). As a principal, I know it will be helpful to have a leadership team for the change innovation, and to survey staff informally and formally to determine their Stages of Concern and Levels of Use. Using those techniques, building and communicating a strategic plan, and thinking ahead to prevent dissent will be advantageous.

As changes are directed from federal and state governments, district and school leaders should not follow blindly into changes they do not understand or do not think will change the system, and therefore student achievement. A principal should work with district and other school leaders to look at data and

research and learn why change is necessary. The principal should determine what qualities are useful to make the changes and should seek out leaders who can help provide the change. Learning how to make change understandable and sustainable can be complicated, but is the only way to make a difference in school improvement. Leading during a culture of change is perhaps the greatest challenge of educational leaders, and one that requires a great deal of wisdom and passion.

Culture

A principal has many responsibilities and is held accountable by many people for many tasks. But any leader of any school would likely agree that success in general, and more specifically, student achievement, is much more attainable when the climate and culture of the school are positive. When students, staff, families, and other stakeholders feel that the school is a positive place for people to learn and teach, they are happier to complete the work. It is necessary for a principal to know about the purpose of having a positive culture and the school's potential within it. The principal should understand the definitions of culture, how to create it, who can help, and what the results will be.

The cultural system was mentioned several times in the ISSL Standard Six, Political Leadership. The principal must understand how the cultural system of the country and of his school will impact the school (Iowa Department of Education, 2000). Especially in urban schools, diversity leads to new

understanding, but it can also lead to misunderstandings. An effective principal knows what the culture of the school should be like and continually works with stakeholders to improve the school's culture. Communication and collaboration with community members is important, but it is particularly essential for the principal to communicate openly with staff members and to regularly work with them to evaluate the school's culture. I believe that student achievement is decidedly reliant on a positive culture.

The purpose of a positive climate and culture is to build a community and provide a place for students and staff to work and achieve success. An effective administrator should be able to create "an atmosphere that breeds motivated and successful teachers, an excited and energized staff, and inspired and stimulated students in an effective school setting" (Terry, 1999, p. 1). Schein (1985), cited by Cunningham (2003, p. 164) said "the most important thing that leaders do is help shape an effective culture in which people will complete their work." When that culture is a place in which people feel appreciated and respected, the work becomes meaningful and of high quality, from both teachers and students.

There are many definitions of culture, but they all center around the feeling and traditions of the school. Some people define culture as simply "the way we do things around here" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 164). Barth (2002, p. 6) offers the same definition but elaborated that culture is also "a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that

are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization." Portin explained that cultural leadership is one of the seven core functions of leadership in schools, and he defined that leadership as "tending to the symbolic resources of the school (its traditions, climate, and history)" (2004, p. 17). The previous definitions of "culture" refer to the atmosphere of the school, but the following definition also provides some observable aspects. Culture is the

> cumulative impact over time of three sets of dynamics: 1) What we say we believe in relation to what we believe; 2) What we say we do in relation to what we do; and 3) What we actually do in relation to what we believe (Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 74).

To distinguish between "climate" and "culture," Karen Dyer of the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, said that climate is "the way we feel about things" and can influence culture, which "encompasses a school's beliefs and practices" (Allen, 2003, p. 1).

Once the principal defines culture and understands how the feel of his school can help create or hinder success, he must figure out ways to build a positive culture. The very first action the principal should take to improve the culture of the school is to be visible. Visibility shows staff, students, and visitors that the principal cares about what is happening in the school. It is important for students to know that their principal is concerned about their academic and social growth, and it is comforting for parents to know, when they enter the building,

that their children are in the hands of an involved leader. Many people comment that they get a "feel" for the climate and culture of a school as they walk through the hallways. Seeing the principal could indicate that he takes care of his school and the people inside. The principal should also walk through classrooms each day to observe and interact with students and teachers. It does not have to be a formal evaluation, but it provides an opportunity to make himself known. Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) list benefits of a principal's walkthroughs, including the chance to gauge the climate (student engagement, cross-curricular concepts); establish himself as an instructional mentor; learn from teachers and students; and develop a team atmosphere when he examines instruction, student motivation, and student achievement with the teachers. The principal should put aside paperwork and other responsibilities during the school day and take advantage of the opportunity to get to know people. In addition to teachers and students, the principal should visit with paraprofessionals, kitchen staff, custodians, secretaries, and volunteers. It is an invaluable skill to make people feel important and part of a group, and it will reap rewards through the years.

I also believe the principal should formally assess the culture of the school when he starts his job to know how different stakeholders feel. Marzano (2003) developed a Snapshot Survey of School Effectiveness Factors (pp. 179-186) for staff to complete. This survey would give a principal background knowledge and baseline data to work with to begin his work toward a positive culture, or

maintain the existing one. My school has a new principal this year, and next year we will become a 6-8 middle school instead of a 7-8 junior high school. To assess the present culture and determine what, if any, changes should be made, I am using Marzano's survey with staff members. My goal is to gather baseline data, examine it and share it with the staff, and then complete the survey again at the same time next year. I believe the principal should make an ongoing commitment to taking the pulse of the school in some way. Hoyle, et. al. (2001) also offer a list of resources for climate assessments and the contact information (pp. 9-12), and they also give suggestions for designing a "homemade" questionnaire. Barth (2002, p. 8) offers a list of questions to ask to assess the culture:

> What do you see, hear, and experience in the school? What *don't* you see and hear? What are the clues that reveal the school's culture? What behaviors get rewards and status? Which ones are greeted with reprimands? Do the adults model the behavior they expect of students? Who makes the decisions? Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school?

An in-depth analysis can identify aspects of culture that should be changed, as well as positive traits that should be reinforced.

In addition to formal assessments, the principal should also conduct a variety of informal assessments of staff, students, and other stakeholders. This

can be done simply through conversations with people and listening to what they think is good and bad about the school's culture. Hall and Hord (2001) called these "one-legged interviews" because most people cannot stand on one leg very long, and those interviews should be quick and casual. This is similar to the principal sharing ideas with people about what the school's vision should be. Many policies, practices, and decisions in a school exist because "we've always done it that way." However, what has always been done might not be what is best for kids. Some maintain that the "instructional leader must assist the faculty in taking continual, fresh inventory of...habituated practices encrusted in our schools' cultures and in categorizing them" (Barth, 2002, p. 9). To create positive culture, the principal, the "prime shaper of school culture," must listen to other groups within the school. Fostering dialogue helps address school climate and the culture of the school (Allen, 2003, p. 1).

It is important for principals to recognize that they alone cannot change a school's culture. Though they might take the lead, principals can and should count on the teacher leaders in the school to play key roles in defining and/or changing the culture. Since teacher leaders are usually in a school longer than a principal, they have much power to create culture. Teacher leaders earn those spots based on credibility, expertise, and relationships, and they influence school resilience by creating a climate of caring and support. Principals should value and support those teacher leaders and involve them in decisions related to teaching

and learning (Patterson & Patterson, 2004). Principals will find that involving teacher leaders will result in more support from the staff. However, principals who try to create or change the culture on their own run into obstacles because no one knows or understand what he wants to do. Not only would the culture not grow, it could even deteriorate because "principals who avoid cultivating leadership in others maintain a kind of stunted culture" (Allen, 2003, p. 2). If the principal works with the staff to make collaborative decisions instead of nurturing dependence, then the staff creates a culture, with the principal, in which all ideas are considered and opinions valued. That message will then be carried to the students and families (Lambert, 2003).

In a positive culture, all educators would focus their energy on the most important reason for the work they do: student achievement. In this era of accountability and standardized test scores, many researchers warn that the emphasis on test taking and data analysis does not mean that the school's culture should suffer or should not be a focus. On the contrary, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) analyzed seventy studies on effective leadership and found twenty-one key areas of responsibility. The research they studied showed that if a principal increased those leadership abilities, he would be more effective and able to help increase student achievement. The first responsibility identified was culture; that the principal "fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation" (p. 49). Barth (2002) also claimed that if the school is a true

community, where everyone looks after everyone, who values lifelong learning of everyone, standardized tests will improve. He cautioned that "the price of short-term success is long-term failure" (Barth, 2002, p. 11). Principals should work to find a balance between focusing on test scores and required achievement, while also cultivating a positive culture.

When the principal has a shared vision with the school community about what kind of culture they want, they are much more likely to be able to focus on student achievement together. The principal has a monumental task in assessing the school's culture and working to change it if it is detrimental to student achievement and the success of the school. He should develop a clear definition of what he thinks the culture should look like and then share that with the staff. When he collaborates with others to create a culture that promotes positive teaching and learning, he can be assured that the results will be "an atmosphere that breeds motivated and successful teachers, an excited and energized staff, and inspired and stimulated students in an effective school setting" (Terry, 1999, p. 1).

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